



# Thomas F. Torrance:

## Reflections of a former student

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In the early 1960s I was privileged to study under a Regius professor of Scots Law, a distinguished jurist with a passion for deducing practice from first principle, a *modus operandi* which was the glory of Scots private law. We undergraduates held him in high regard. We might even have liked him had it not been for his barely concealed contempt for anything that resembled a student.

So it was with not a little misgiving that I came back from Canada in 1968 to study theology. Was life under the renowned Professor Torrance to be another round of magisterial threat where the standard would be everything and the miserable life of the student of no importance?

Certainly the first few weeks with TF were disconcerting. I had always been a conscientious note-taker. I wrote it all down. Yet I still imagined that I could well be the only one on the tiered benches who had little idea as to what any of it meant. (The Revd George Hastie's photograph of TF in action included in *Incarnation*<sup>1</sup> is classic and captures the mood.) Torrance did warn us. He told of an aspiring concert pianist who went to study in Basel. The maestro told the young man that for many weeks there would be nothing but pain as his hands stretched to the necessary span. And so it was. Over the months we were coming to terms with the wondrous logic of God's mighty acts of salvation. We were becoming fluent in a new language; the vocabulary of the Faith.

Already there emerged two groups. There were those who were impatient with the language and who would have preferred a more discursive, less dogmatic approach to theology. At that time New College received credit year students from the United States and from Germany, and TF's dogmatic theology caused some of them to voice considerable annoyance. During 1969 the Divinity Students' Council

(at that point the political wing of Torrance militancy) arranged a mediaeval disputation in the old common room. The dissidents had their say and were duly routed by Torrance's responses. Some of them left at the end of term. There was an element of undergraduate jousting about the event which I suspect quite escaped the notice of TF who with characteristic sincerity saw it simply as another opportunity to teach the truth. Those of us in the other 'camp' would be forever 'Tom's Boys', not because we were any better students but because in his teaching we sensed that we were being offered a key that would allow us to understand the cosmos in the light of God's action in Jesus Christ.

Through the years it has pained me to hear the cliché trotted out that 'of course Torrance was incomprehensible'. After all, I may not be conversant with the language of the *Lancet* or the *British Medical Journal* but I would certainly hope that my general practitioner had learned it and grasped its concepts from his teachers before prescribing my treatment! Every student of TF knew the importance of the big second year essay, "The relationship of the incarnation with the atonement". These were the days of unlined foolscap with the two inch pencil margin for comments, the black fountain pen ink and, of course, no ink blots or scorings out for the page would have been re-written. Mine was returned with the following note which shows the whole purpose of this great academic's teaching: 'You clearly grasp the main issues and expand them as if you can preach them as Gospel!'

So it was that some of us left New College as TF's disciples, believing that in terms of the Faith he was right and would always be so as a Doctor of the Church.

As with all the best products, Tom's teaching came with good after-sales service. Through the years I found him always ready to give advice on particular issues. In my own experience these were as diverse as work on the implications of the Gospel for the ecological debate, liturgical questions when I was Convener of the Panel on Worship, and the theology of ordination when, for an all-too-short enlightened period, the Presbytery of Perth was the only one to have the newly ordained celebrate the Eucharist as the climax of the act so that, in TF's terms, 'the hands were filled'.

Of course we have grown. I left college with powerful motivation because of Tom Torrance and James Torrance and Fathers Roland Walls and John Zizioulas, the Department of Systematic Theology and Christian Dogmatics as it was then. None of that has waned a whit, but the years brought humility and a gentler spirit. I shudder to think of the young bachelor minister rushing around his first rural parish armed to the teeth with answers before anyone asked any questions. That was not TF; it was me. That was not confidence; it was arrogance. But with the maturing came a great lasting thankfulness that any crises or doubt in ministry have been to do with myself, not the Faith, not the ministry, not God's Holy Church.

In the pastoral care of the parish it was to the touching place of the hypostatic union that issues were brought for resolution. The first principle of the Gospel, that in his redeeming love God became incarnate of Mary, was for TF the very nub of *practical theology*. As to worship, both TF and JB had made it plain that liturgy is doxological, not didactic, and that our fretful constructions can be laid aside as our priestly function is caught up by the Holy Spirit into the offering of the risen, ascended, glorified Lord Jesus Christ before the Father. As for preaching by the lectionary through the Christian year, *Space, Time and Incarnation*<sup>2</sup> and *Space, Time and Resurrection*<sup>3</sup> have been invaluable.

During his year as Moderator, TF visited Castle Douglas to preach at an evening service. From my little Galloway parish I gathered up a group from the Guild and packed them on cushions into the rear of my van (which I had washed out after taking lambs to market the previous week). Among the group was Mrs Jessie "Chippie" McWilliam, a delightful country woman. That night Tom proclaimed the Faith at some length with particular reference to the Cappodocian Fathers. 'How was that then, Mrs McWilliam?' I asked on the dark drive home. 'My, that was grand!' replied Chippie beaming. Clearly something great had taken place in St Andrew's Kirk that night, and she had been there.

A year or so before his death, four of us visited Professor Torrance in his nursing home to express our heartfelt thanks. He prayed with us and for us. The after-sales service continued.

I have always hoped, through thirty-seven years of ministry, that my great teacher would approve of what I said and did because I trusted him. And no more have I sought his blessing than last Sunday when I was received into the Orthodox Church. But, after all, it was he whose teaching was rooted and grounded in the Faith of Nicaea/Chalcedon. And when I was asked at chrismation to take an Orthodox name, it was with thought of TF that I chose Athanasius, to whose teaching he led me forty years ago.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008).
- <sup>2</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976).